

Graziella

(Extracted from *The Argosy* summer number of 1888)

The Circus Koberstein boasted the finest horses, wittiest clowns and most daring athletes of any troupe that had ever come to Nuremberg; but the attraction that filled the building to overflowing, was the lovely little Signorina Graziella and her graceful antics on three black Arabian horses.

Surmises as to who the charming young *équestrienne* might be were rife among the *habitués* of the circus. Some declared her the daughter of a noble house on whom disgrace had fallen. Others recognised her as the child of a certain state prisoner, who, because of her father's misfortunes, was obliged to seek her own livelihood. All were unanimous in believing that she was no light-headed lassie gathered from a city's poverty and vice; for she politely but firmly held all admirers at a distance, refused their love-tokens, one and all, and abashed the most assured by her simple, child-like purity.

She was in reality neither a Signorina nor a great lady in disguise. She was only pretty little Mary Banks, a Berkshire farmer's daughter, who had spent her childhood days in the fresh country air, galloping over the moors and hillsides on a rough pony, acquiring a grace and fearlessness that any city-bred equestrian might sigh for in vain.

She had, a year before, spent some months in Germany, and had made the acquaintance of the brothers Koberstein, through mutual friends. They were worthy and respectable men, the fathers of large families, irreproachable in their domestic lives, well considered by their fellow townsmen. They had fallen in love with Mary Banks's pure and lovely face, had discovered her extraordinary skill, grace, and daring on horseback, and half-laughingly had asked her if she would not become a member of their troupe. The offer was to bear fruit in the future. When reverses came and her father died, Mary remembered the offer, and the brothers were only too glad to receive her. So it came to pass that in less than a year's time, she had become the queen of the arena. At seventeen Mary Banks, alias Signorina Graziella, began to win for herself golden laurels, which, in prosaic coin of the country, found their way to the needy friends in Berkshire; none the less acceptable for having been gathered under the tinsel canopy of a German circus.

As Graziella would enter the arena, no eyes among the enthusiastic spectators rested on her so admiringly and lovingly as those of Paul Hillern; and no one else endured such torturing anxiety lest, in her daring leaps on the backs of her horses, she might lose her footing and fall. But she never fell, and after each performance she gathered up her bouquets and boxes of bonbons with the same happy smile, to appear on the following evening as fresh as ever.

“The girl has not a bit of the hunted, weary look that one so often sees among these fairies of the arena,” people said of her, giving in words Graziella’s greatest fascination.

Paul Hillern was also a member of the troupe, but a very humble one compared with Graziella. His duty was to collect and count the tickets at each representation, see that the cushions and carpets were properly dusted and shaken, and to make himself useful in whatever way occasion offered. The Circus Koberstein had established itself at Nuremberg for the winter season, built and furnished its own great barn of a building, and within its walls, the servants found little time for idleness.

Hillern’s duties kept him many a weary night out of his bed, but in addition to a very meagre pay, he was allowed the priceless boon of watching night after night the performance of his idol, Graziella, from an undesirable seat behind the musicians.

The young-man had known far better days and had associations of a far more elevating type than the gaudy glitter of the circus. But he had been unfortunate and had grown very shy and reserved, and the only being to whom he had even spoken of his troubles was Graziella herself, who, with her gentle, sympathetic ways, had charmed away his reticence.

They had gone out to walk together sometimes on Sunday afternoons: he in the seventh heaven of delight at what he considered her sweet

condescension, and she trusting to his guidance as confidently as if he had been her elder brother. That she could care for him in any other than a friendly way, Hillern never dreamed possible; he could as easily imagine a princess falling in love with a chimney-sweep; but in Paul Hillern the little prima-donna of the circus had a staunch friend and protector, who would willingly have given his life to save her an hour of suffering. There seemed to be a tacit understanding between these two waifs; and sometimes in the midst of her daring leaps Graziella would nod and smile at the shabby young fellow sitting forlornly behind the big drums, sending a thrill through his heart which changed the thumping and squeaking of the worn-out instruments into the music of heaven.

The representation was over, the clowns had washed away the paint and powder from their faces, and in loose, rusty clothes had repaired to the nearest inn for a pipe and glass of beer before going to bed. The ladies and gentlemen of the ring had departed to their respective quarters in the town; and the horses, seventy in number, had been safely blanketed for the night in their stables directly adjoining the circus building.

Hillern was left in sole charge; the regular watchman being allowed leave to attend a wedding at a neighbouring village.

While busy over his accounts, he was interrupted by a tramp of the raggedest type, who, attracted by the light, stumbled up the steps of the

entrance, and begged to be allowed to sleep on one of the cushioned benches inside.

Such requests had frequently been made before, and Hillern had strict orders to refuse them all. And so reluctantly enough—for the fellow looked very weary and had a kindly, honest face—Hillern, in the words so detested by little Jo, bade him “move on.” Then in the puzzling rows of figures before him, he forgot the vagrant’s existence as soon as the sentence was uttered.

His office work finished, Hillern pulled a volume of Schiller from his pocket and began to read to keep himself awake.

It was cold in the little *bureau*, and he began to think longingly of the warmth and comfort within his reach if he chose to take it. The boxes frequented by the richer class of circus-goers were carpeted, cushioned unsparingly, and warmed with hot water pipes. Here he might stretch himself at his ease, oblivious to the frosty air outside, and save himself many hours of discomfort. The only obstacle was the light. A rule rigorously enforced was that no uncovered light should be taken within the circus building; and Hillern had no portable light possible to read by; nothing but a thick candle which he had bought to illumine the little room in a side street where he slept.

He secured this candle in an empty ink bottle: a cautious fellow like himself could surely break the rule once with impunity, and the night

was bitterly cold: double locked the doors and ensconced himself in box number five, with his open book on his knees.

The big ring and tiers of empty seats looked very ghostly in the light of his one candle, and the silence in that place, usually so teeming with sound, was very oppressive. He could almost imagine he saw the heavy oriental curtains, screening the entrance to the stables, roll aside, and Graziella gliding from beneath their folds.

Graziella! There was a magic in the name that made the young man forget the pages before him, his surroundings, everything save that he loved her, and longed with an unspeakable longing to take her away from scenes that must in time mar the priceless purity of her heart and mind. What a fool he was to have such aspirations! He was scarcely able to earn his own bread! And even if he had it in his own power to help Graziella to a better existence, she would probably scorn him as a stepping-stone.

The unaccustomed warmth told upon Hillern's senses until his waking dream gradually resolved itself into the grotesque fancies accompanying sleep.

Poverty and all its attendant horrors were forgotten, and with Graziella he revelled in all the delights of paradise. It was summer again, and the sun shone brilliantly, intensely, with a heat that slowly opened the dreamer's eyes. Where was he, and what had happened? Were those phantom horses prancing and tossing their heads in a mad gallop about

the ring? And what meant the great glare of light and the overpowering heat? Heavens! The whole place was on fire! The cushion beside him was smouldering sullenly, and the flames had licked their way along the row of seats, and were rushing madly up the painted wooden pillars to the roof. The angry red tongues met no resistance in their way, for the whole building was of light pine and burnt like tinder.

Those were not ghostly steeds in the arena, but real horses of flesh and blood, Graziella's darlings among them; deluded, poor brutes, into the ring by the glare of light which to them was the well-known signal for their performance. Though quivering and snorting with fright at the great blaze around them, the perfectly-trained creatures went through their exercises, balancing themselves on their hind legs, vaulting and prancing to and fro to the time of imaginary music, as carefully as if their master stood in the midst of them directing every movement.

Hillern saw his overturned candle lying at his feet, the unmistakable source of that stream of fire, and his heart stood still with horror. "Fire! Fire!" he shouted, with all the energy of despair; and "Fire! Fire! Fire!" was echoed by a host of brazen throats in the streets; and soon the whole town knew that the Circus Koberstein was a mass of flames.

Outside the burning building, a unit in the great crowd, Hillern could not bear to stand and see the work of destruction go on. The shrieks of the dying horses which no one could rescue, the doleful predictions of ruin to the brothers Koberstein and the troupe dependent on them, went

through him like a knife; for he, and he alone, was to blame for this tragic result of his wicked carelessness. How could he face his employers on the morrow and confess his guilt?

The thought was madness; and, covering his face with his hands, he stole out of the crowd, and, like a hunted deer, sped through byways and alleys far, far away into the open country.

He had no other pursuer than a guilty conscience; but that seemed goading him to desperation. Far better for him would it have been had he perished in the flames he had kindled. Still he flew on, until, utterly exhausted, he sank down at the outskirts of a village, and crawled into a barn, where, on a pile of hay, he fell into a deep sleep.

Again Hillern awoke, but on a scene delightfully calm and peaceful compared with the wild tumult of the previous night. Men were chopping wood under an adjoining shed; and one of them was singing over his work. A girl was carrying on her head a pail of foaming milk towards a rambling farm-house. At Hillern's request for a drink of the refreshing liquid, she cheerfully set the bucket down, and after he had satisfied his thirst, made him follow her to the house, where more substantial refreshment was urged upon him. The kindness of these rustic people seemed to Hillern a good omen for his future—a hope that was verified afterwards.

In a far distant town, the wanderer gained the post of amanuensis to an eccentric old gentleman, for whom the labour was very light; and

Hillern's fortunes prospered better than ever in his life before. His employer was an Englishman residing abroad; a Mr. Codrington. He seemed to like the young man from the first, and gave him many a proof of his favour. One day, it happened that, at great risk to his own life, Hillern was able to rescue the old gentleman from certain death, in the form of an advancing locomotive at the Dresden railway station; and, out of gratitude, Mr. Codrington advanced his young protege to the position of private secretary, with a promise of a gradually increasing salary.

A year passed, and during a few weeks' holiday, an irresistible desire to revisit Nuremberg, the scene hallowed to him by memories of Graziella, took possession of Hillern. He had never heard any particulars of the great fire, the extent of the loss, or the fortunes of the troupe since his desertion. He only knew that the circus Koberstein was not yet disbanded. He longed to hear of the welfare of his darling, and to know in which of the many towns on their track his friends of the ring had established themselves. Did Graziella ever think of him, or wonder what had become of him? He feared these questions would remain unanswered for many a long day.

He left the railway train at one of the suburbs of Nuremberg, and, walking towards the town, his path led through the cemetery. It was early spring, and the countless wooden crosses were hung with fresh wreaths, and fragrant violets peeped forth from many of the better

tended resting-places of the dead. One grave especially was remarkable for the wealth of primroses upon it, and Hillern, curious to know more of one so evidently regretted, stopped to read the inscription on a fresh marble cross raised over the grave.

To his amazement he read as follows:

ERECTED TO THE MEMORY OF
Paul Hillern
WHO PERISHED BY FIRE ON THE NIGHT OF
JANUARY 8TH, 18 — .
R. I. P.

So this was his supposed fate; and he was a dead man to his friends, if he had any place at all in their memories. He could not be quite forgotten, because of the primrose garlands on his grave. And yet what friend had he left in the town who would care to offer him this graceful tribute? It was very flattering and very mysterious too. It was a natural supposition that he had met his death in the fire, but still it was not pleasant to think the world had laid him so comfortably to rest. What a fright any of his old acquaintances would have, if they saw him walking in the graveyard like an uneasy ghost. But all who knew him had dispersed long ago, and he need not fear discovery.

Another surprise awaited Hillern as he neared the town. Posters were stuck on every available wall, on which the words Signorina Graziella, in letters a foot long, dazzled his eyes, as if written in fire. By a strange fatality the re-organised Circus Koberstein had returned to Nuremberg, and had given its first representation on the eve of Hillern's arrival. It had new appointments throughout. Its valuable horses had been worthily replaced; it had been able to retain most of its former artistes, the renowned Signorina Graziella among them; and it hoped for a renewal of the kind patronage of the public.

So Graziella and he again breathed the same air. Hillern's heart beat warmly at the thought. But he had no right to show his face again in the familiar haunts, or to re-establish the old friendliness with the girl whom he adored. He was an outlaw—a dead man—whose appearance would only terrify her and all else who saw him. Disconsolately enough he turned away from the direction of the new circus, whither his steps were leading him instinctively.

Once in a semi-disguise he took a seat in a dark corner of the building, where he could watch Graziella in her graceful movements as of old. She was, if possible, lovelier than ever, but a shade more serious-looking, he fancied.

An elegantly-dressed young gentleman in one of the private boxes awakened a jealous uneasiness in Hillern by his undisguised admiration of Graziella, which she seemed faintly to reciprocate. The handsome

stranger devoured her with his eyes all through her performance, and at its conclusion a most superb bouquet of rare flowers was presented to her by a servant in livery. Reasoning with himself, Hillern remembered that such adulation had been heaped upon the little fairy ever since her first appearance in public without any further result, and he decided that he was a fool for his anxiety.

For a few days Hillern haunted the town like a culprit, and then resolved to quit the place for ever, until a conversation he overheard in a café decided him to prolong his stay.

“The frosty Graziella seems melting at last under the rays of Count Greffken’s smile,” said a gentleman, sipping his glass of Benedictiner.

“They say she thinks he has serious intentions; wants to marry her. Imagine the feelings of the lady mother if her son brought home a circus girl to his ancestral roof, even though she were lovely as Venus herself.”

“That Greffken could be in earnest is perfectly absurd, and the girl is a fool to trust him. I know for a certainty that before many weeks have passed, his engagement with a distant cousin of his from North Germany will be formally announced.”

“Poor little Graziella will be heart-broken. Hush, here he comes.”

The man whom Hillern had noticed in the box at the circus joined his friends with a polite greeting, and took out his cigar case.

Hillern listened no more; he had heard and seen enough to assure him that Graziella was in great danger, and needed his protection.

How to arrange an interview with her was the next perplexing question, and forming different plans to this end, his steps led him again towards the cemetery. Someone was bending over his grave—a woman. Strange that the resting-place of such a waif could awaken interest! Perhaps now he would discover the ministering angel who adorned his ashes with flowers. A dozen paces nearer and he recognised Graziella, fastening a fresh primrose wreath to the marble cross. She wore the same simple dress of a year ago when they had gone together on those delicious rambles in search of the same flowers of which her graceful offering was made.

Though wild with eagerness to throw himself at her feet and thank her for her angelic goodness, Hillern dared not shock her by presenting himself before her as one risen from the dead, but slipped quietly out of sight behind a tall monument to await her departure. She carefully removed all the faded flowers from the turf, disposed tastefully the new ones, and then with tears raining down her face, bent down and kissed the grave passionately. Then, with bowed head and drawn veil, she left the peaceful city of the dead.

What more touching proof of her attachment, and perhaps love, could he have than this scene in which she believed herself entirely alone? The triumphant thought that she mourned him in her heart awakened a wild hope in Hillern's bosom, and all his fears of the past week melted away

like snow. He would now come forward and brave the wrath of his former employers, if only to save Graziella from her false lover.

He wrote her a letter asking for a meeting in an adjacent park, and speaking of a serious mistake which he would explain, signed his own name and awaited the result.

With eyes big and bright with astonishment, Graziella, accompanied by her maid, came to the appointed trysting-place of the friend whom she had mourned as dead for more than a year.

Amazed at his own temerity, Hillern came forward, took the frightened girl in his arms, and actually kissed her white forehead.

“Is it really you, Paul, and no ghost or cruel deception?” she said, showing no eagerness to free herself from the contact of his arm.

She had never called him Paul before, and for the moment it seemed to the young man the most musical name in all the calendar.

“But explain, Paul. My head aches with trying to guess the truth.”

Paul then related every particular of the story which had weighed upon him for so many months, confessing his guilt, and feeling more light-hearted that his secret was no longer his alone.

“But who was the poor charred creature they found in the ruins? You watched alone that night.”

“Did anyone perish in the flames?”

“Yes; the remains of a man were found, and of course we all thought it must be you. Oh, it was dreadful!”

The figure of the weary tramp who had begged a shelter on that memorable night—forgotten until that moment—rose up before Hillern’s mental vision. The poor fellow must have slyly stolen in regardless of his command, and so met his death.

“My carelessness cost a human life, as well as more valuable property than I can ever hope to restore,” he said disconsolately. “Do you not despise such a scoundrel, Graziella?”

“It was only an accident after all; you blame yourself too much,” said the girl gently. “And I am so thankful to have you back again,” taking one of his hands in both her tiny palms.” Do you know, Paul, I have mourned you very bitterly. You were such a good, true friend, and I needed you so much. Someone, the son of a very grand family, told me he loved me, and that every luxury should be mine if I would love him in return.”

“The villain!”

“Oh, no, he was not a villain. I did not care for him much, but I had no one else. You were gone, and the circus was growing very hateful to me. I sometimes felt that this man must be deceiving me, for why should so fine a gentleman want to marry a poor circus girl? No one seemed to care enough for me to find out the truth; they only said I was in great luck, and ought not to criticise my good fortune too closely. I was

greatly perplexed and troubled, and my only consolation was to go and sob my grief out on your grave, thinking, perhaps, you would hear and pity me.”

“Poor Graziella!”

“Now I have you back again, and my grand lover may bestow his bouquets and tender glances on someone more worthy of them. I am in doubt no longer.”

“My darling! Are you telling the truth? Do you really care for me a little?”

“You foolish boy! I have loved you ever since I lost you! And long before that—only you would not see it.”

The brothers Koberstein had been largely reimbursed for their loss by fire through generous public subscription, and were therefore ready to judge Paul Hillern leniently, and declared themselves averse to his making any restitution whatever of their property. A kindness which he rewarded by taking from them the brightest star of their firmament—Graziella.